SCAFFOLDING

WHAT IS SCAFFOLDING?

Both a *structure* and a *process,* **scaffolding** refers to dynamic and responsive supports that enable learners to develop their full potential and eventually become autonomous learners. With appropriate scaffolding for academic practices, students are able to simultaneously build conceptual understandings, academic skills, and the language needed to enact them.
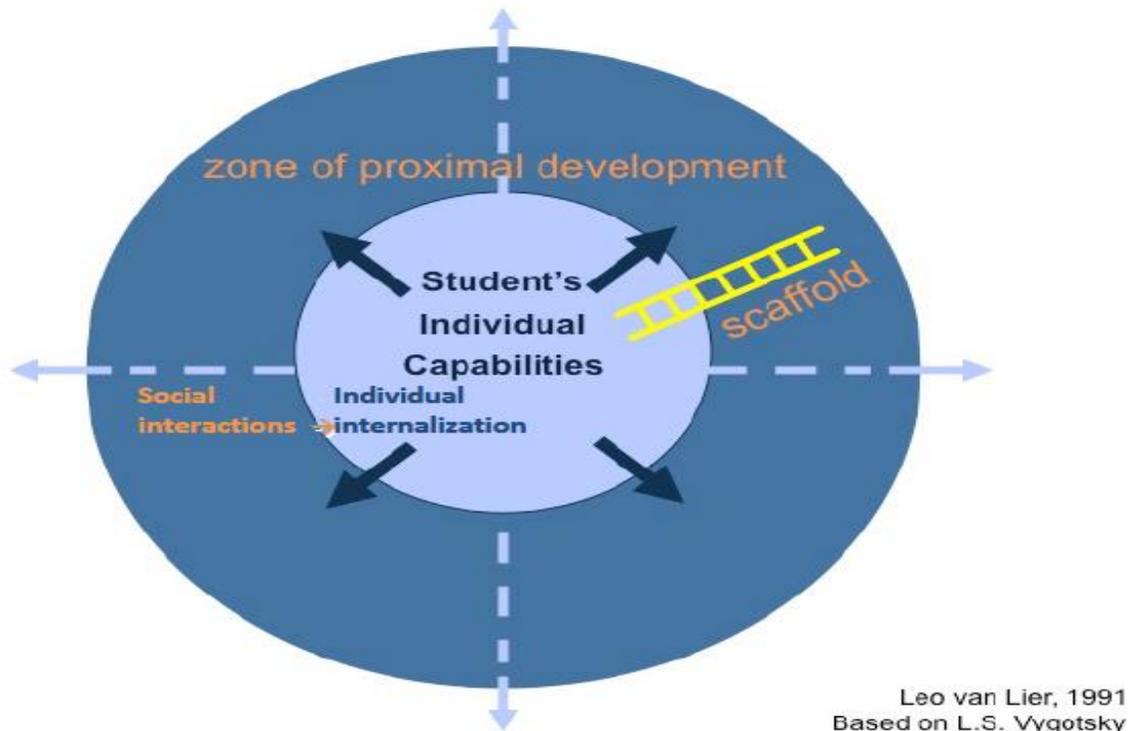
EXPLORING THE SCAFFOLDING METAPHOR

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase referring to one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness between them. In this case, the actual object referred to is a literal scaffold: a framework built up from wooden or metal poles and boards to support construction on buildings (like the kind often seen on the streets of New York City). As work is completed, the scaffold is removed piece by piece until the structure can stand on its own.

Thus, the literal scaffold is not a static or fixed object, but rather it is constantly changing to support the structure as it is built. In a similar way, scaffolds in learning are also moving, being constantly adapted to the learner in a particular setting as s/he builds autonomy.

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HOW DOES SCAFFOLDING WORK?

The concept of the pedagogical scaffold is an extension of Lev Vygotsky's work on learning as a social process. Learning, Vygotsky believed, does not happen solely in the mind of the individual, but in a broader sphere that extended into the social context. This area is known as the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD), or the distance between the individual's current capabilities and potential capabilities.

zone of proximal development

Student's Individual Capabilities

scaffold

Social interactions → Individual internalization
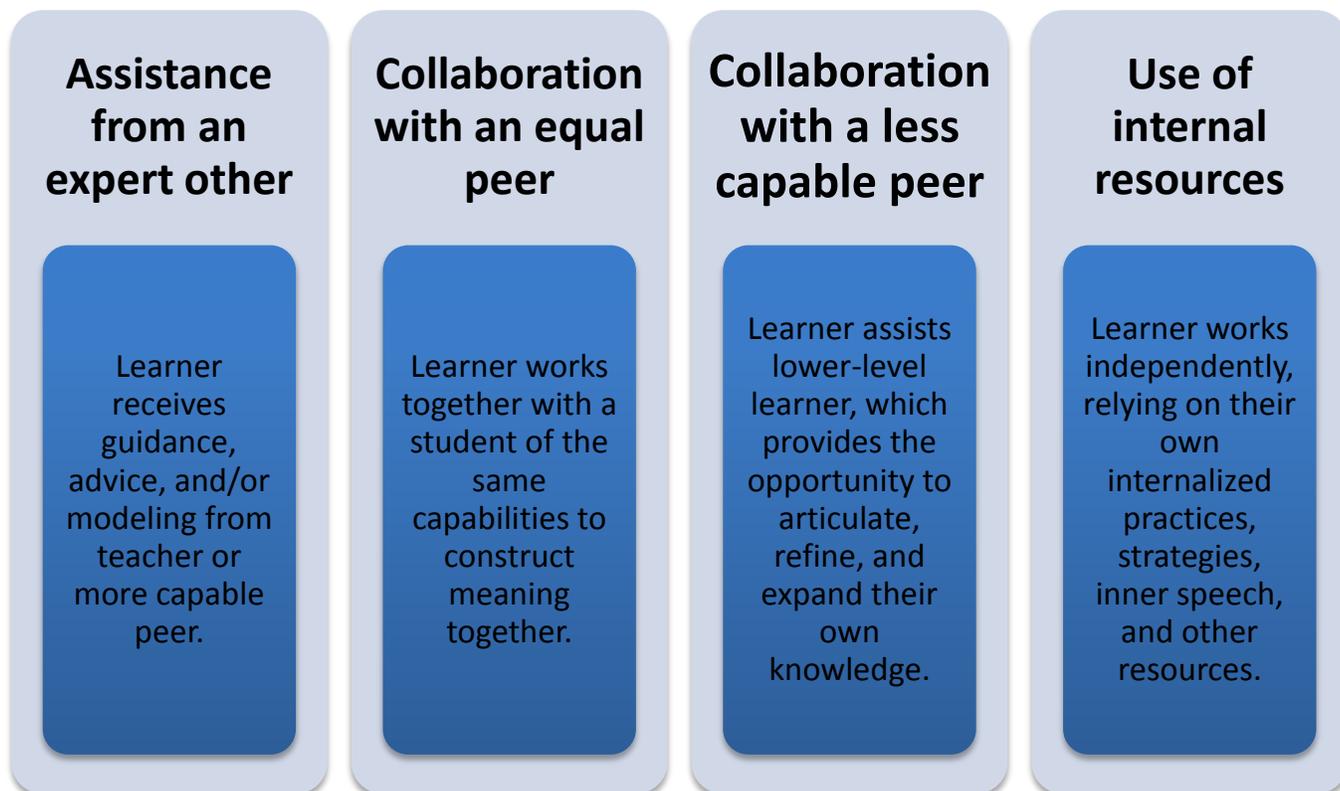
Leo van Lier, 1991
Based on L.S. Vygotsky

Based on his readings of Vygotsky, Jerome Bruner suggested the idea of the scaffold as a way to work within the ZPD, enabling students to work just beyond their current capacities with the support of a teacher and/or in collaboration with peers. The provided graphic illustrates this concept. The visual also shows the social learning process, which occurs first as learners construct meaning through social interaction, followed by individual internalization of the information.

When students take part in collaborative academic work beyond their individual levels of development, they are taking part in a process of apprenticeship, learning ways of doing things in a school setting. While at first the students' attempts might be imitation of the teacher or peers, over time the student begins to own the processes, ideas, and language they are practicing.

TYPES OF SCAFFOLDING INTERACTIONS

Within the ZPD, four types of scaffolding interactions are possible:

Assistance from an expert other	Collaboration with an equal peer	Collaboration with a less capable peer	Use of internal resources
Learner receives guidance, advice, and/or modeling from teacher or more capable peer.	Learner works together with a student of the same capabilities to construct meaning together.	Learner assists lower-level learner, which provides the opportunity to articulate, refine, and expand their own knowledge.	Learner works independently, relying on their own internalized practices, strategies, inner speech, and other resources.

SCAFFOLDING IS BOTH STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

Scaffolding has two elements: *structure* and *process.* The **structure of scaffolding** refers to the constant, but flexible, supports that teachers build into lessons. For example, a teacher might plan ahead to divide a text into "chunks" of meaning, label them with sub-titles that clue readers to the main topic, and provide accompanying "focus" questions that help the reader determine key ideas.

These structures enable the **process of scaffolding,** which unfolds in moment-to-moment classroom interactions as teachers support students' participation and construction of understanding. Constant evaluation of the in-the-moment process of scaffolding helps teachers assess and modify their built-in scaffolding structures to move as students progress.

CANTERBURY TALES

The Pardoner's Tale

The pardoner, who is a priest, explains to the pilgrims how he earns money. He says that first preaches people about their evil ways, especially their greed, avarice, and covetousness.

Next, he promises that because he is a holy pardoner for God, he can pardon them for their sins, he can excuse them for their greed, and they can go to Heaven instead of Hell. They just need to pay.

This is the story he tells the pilgrims. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it is a story of greed, avarice, and covetousness.

Three young men of ill repute
Why do these men have bad reputations? How do we meet them?

In the country of Flanders, there once was a group of young men who spent all their time drinking and gambling and getting into trouble. They went from bar to bar, getting drunk, playing dice for money, dancing with bad women, and swearing offensively. And among this group of wild young men, there were three who were especially bad.

One morning these three were in a bar, already drinking even though it was quite early, when they suddenly heard a bell ringing outside. It was the small, clear sound of the bell that the people ring when they are carrying a dead person in a coffin to the graveyard.

The above visual is an illustration of "chunking" text and adding focus questions. To apply this strategy in your own classroom, divide the text into units of meaning. For each "chunk" of text, create subtitles and focus questions that will alert the student to the most important information, but do not reveal everything. In addition to these strategies, the task above features space for them to take notes in the margin, as well as additional scaffolds in the form of a picture, which helps the students visualize as they read.

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FEATURES OF SCAFFOLDING

Classroom scaffolding has six features:

Continuity

- Teachers structure tasks in ways that provide students repeated opportunities to practice and learn ritualized participation structures, which become more varied as students begin to "own" them. Tasks are connected to each other and build logically upon one another.

Supportive environment

- Students are provided with multiple ways to access material, and participation is encouraged, even if "peripheral" at first. Teachers cultivate a classroom culture where students feel safe and supported to explore new ideas and take risks.

Intersubjectivity

- With a supportive environment in place, students feel comfortable collaborating with others, listening to others--and being listened to--attentively.

Contingency

- Teachers respond to the needs of their students at a given moment, with each step deliberately designed to support the student in their next level of understanding (that is, each step is *contingent* on the responses of the learner).

Handover/takeover

- As students become more capable, the teacher *hands over* more autonomy to the learner, who in turn *takes over* an increasing part of what had been previously supported. In other words, supports are removed as the learner progresses.

Flow

- A balance is drawn between student capabilities, level of challenge offered, and level of supports provided. When a state of flow occurs, students are absorbed in their work, finding it intrinsically motivating.

The task

In groups of four, students receive a prompt, such as, "We think a story called 'The Necklace' may be about…" Each student in the group writes this prompt and numbers their paper. One student begins by offering an idea, which is then echoed by someone at the table. Another student proposes an idea, which is again echoed. The process continues until the teacher calls time. Students draw a line under the last idea written, which signals the separation of group work from later individual work. The teacher then calls on a member of one team to read the group's list, which might predict the story is about "a rich lady," "a birthday gift," and "a girl who loves jewelry." Other groups check off similar ideas on their own lists as they are read and record new ideas below the line they drew. The teacher calls on a student from the next group, asking for "novel ideas only." The student reads remaining "novel" ideas from their list. This continues until all novel ideas have been exhausted.

How the task scaffolds learning

"Novel ideas only" is an excellent activity for eliciting and activating prior knowledge or predictions. The activity structures student participation by providing a routine structure with clearly defined steps and focusing their attention on listening to their groupmates' ideas. Furthermore, students learn that in contributing to a class conversation, *only new information* should be offered. Finally, after hearing the class's collective ideas, students have built interest in the text and are eager to find out if their predictions are relevant.